

## Blog posts

# Theatre of the absurd

A BRUSSELS DIARY: PART 7

Ahead of the European elections on 22 May, Betto van Waarden describes the daily routine of decision-making in Brussels.

Exclusive 21 May, by Betto van Waarden

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The meetings of ministers in Brussels are like plays — at least the meetings about education, youth, culture and sport (EYCS) I attended were theatrical. Stuck to the script. Discussions about Syria or the new Common Agricultural Policy might be different, because they concern politically controversial matters, and ministers need to negotiate to reach agreements. But the EYCS meetings were so scripted that I used to joke that I could write the minutes in advance.

The Council of the European Union, or Council of Ministers, meets in different configurations. When the Council concerns economic affairs, the EU ministers for economic affairs attend; when the meeting is about the environment, the environment ministers show up. At the EYCS, the ministers responsible for education, youth affairs, culture, and sport are present. As the EU has limited powers in EYCS areas, and the EYCS matters the EU does address are usually not controversial, there are few problems that ministers have to decide at the highest political level. Lower-ranking civil servants draw up detailed agreements beforehand, mostly outside meetings, so even meetings of lower-ranking officials are often scripted.

To give ministers a reason to come to Brussels, the Presidency usually organises a debate about a current topic. In May 2013 the culture ministers discussed the use of culture in EU external relations. But as ministers are managers with overfull agendas, most are supplied with full speeches on the debate topics by their civil servants. They won't have to speak twice, since it's impossible to have a true "debate" with 28 ministers. By the time everyone has spoken once it's already lunchtime — or time to get on the evening flight back home. The result is a "tour de table", Eurospeak to indicate that the chair will

go round the table to let all participants speak. At the EYCS Council of Ministers, this meant that 28 ministers each read a three-minute speech, often describing policy initiatives in their home countries. Due to the prepared speeches, ministers' comments barely relate to each other. In case a minister might hesitate, he/she is accompanied by the deputy permanent representative in Brussels for political advice — further accompanied by attachés, for content-related advice. There are no risks or surprises.

Once in a blue moon a controversial point arises, and everyone jumps up. Diplomats hurry around to consult in low voices with their opposite numbers from other countries while the ministers are speaking. Every half-hour a new compromise text is proposed, which the Council Secretariat quickly prints and distributes. And every so often a short break is announced, so that ministers and diplomats, in huddles, can quickly negotiate informally in English. After which they continue formally at the conference table in their national languages with interpretation. One example was the proposed EU strategy for combating the manipulation of sport results. Malta generally agreed with the draft text, but was the only state that could not accept a particular paragraph about illegal gambling. The meeting ran into the evening hours, but the ministers and diplomats didn't even seem to notice. They were radiant, and you could tell why they chose this profession.

But exciting moments are scarce and the tours des tables long. The Council now experiments to make debates more interesting. External experts are invited to introduce the discussions. Education guru Pasi Sahlberg, director-general of Finland's Centre for international mobility and cooperation, talked about the quality of teachers. Travis Tygart, the American who led the Lance Armstrong doping investigation, discussed the role of public authorities in combating complex doping practices in sport, and made an impression among European sport ministers; he was educated at a Methodist university in the southern US, had a military buzzcut and oversized suit, and used powerful language to describe "right and wrong" in sport. After his passionate conclusion that "this fight is about the soul of sport", the ministers calmly resumed their prepared speeches.

The Council also tries to liven up the debates by introducing a more informal "inner circle" format, where ministers and Commissioner sit in a small circle without assistants. After the Swedish education minister once spontaneously addressed his Finnish colleague, many states became so enthusiastic about this format that it is now often used. (The Swede desperately wanted to know why the modernised Swedish education system still ranks lower than the traditional Finnish system.) Some attachés still protest during the preparations for the meetings, because they and their ministers find it scary that ministers have to sit without any assistants.

Few are improvising, though. One minister exclaimed during a tour de table how wonderful this new inner circle concept was, how he would disregard the speech his civil servants had prepared and react spontaneously to his colleagues. He looked up for a moment before he continued reading — the spontaneous remark about disregarding his prepared speech was part of that prepared speech, it seems. Theatre of the absurd?

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